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THE PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN ROOT FOR ‘APPLE’ AND THE PROBLEM OF COMPARATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

Abstract. This article investigates the problem of the lexeme for ‘apple’ in the reconstructed Indo-European for which there are two roots possible, namely **meh₂-lo* and **h₂ebol-*, both meaning ‘apple’ or a fruit similar to it. The former has been usually taken as a borrowing while the latter as a true PIE root for ‘apple’. However, there are problems with this assumption – the presence of the vowel **/a/* and the consonant **/b/*, both of marginal status, and the attestation of this lexeme mostly in the North-West Indo-European languages. It is shown that the lexeme in question might actually be an ancient *Wanderwort*.

Keywords: etymology, Proto-Indo-European, *Wanderwort*, loanwords

1. The Proto-Indo-European (PIE) reconstructed lexeme for ‘apple’ presents us with an interesting geographical distribution. It is attested in Lithuanian and Slavic (Lithuanian *obuolỹs*, Slavic **(j)abl-ũko*, Russian *jábloko*, Polish *jablko* from the lengthened grade **ābōl*, cf. Smoczyński 2007: 432), Germanic (Old English *æppel*, Old High German *apful*), Celtic (Old Irish *ubull* with additional problems) as a lexeme coming back to the PIE root **h₂ebōl* (cf. the discussion and additional forms in Gamkrelidze-Ivanov 1995: 548–549). But in Greek, Latin and Hittite this lexeme is absent and the word for ‘apple’ present in those languages would theoretically go back to the **meh₂-lo* proto-form (Greek *μήλον*, Latin *mālum*, Hittite *mahlaš*). Now, the question arises if this is merely a coincidence that the North-West Indo-European languages differ from those of South Indo-European in this word or whether it is a sign of something else. I would opt for the latter. Of course, as Weiss rightly observes, we have to keep in mind, in dealing with the differences in lexicon, that the language “may have had and lost any given lexeme” (Weiss 2009: 472 n. 37). This lexeme has also been reconstructed by some scholars as a PIE word, notably a hysterodynamic *l*-stem: nom. **h₂éb-ōl*, acc. **h₂b-él-m*, gen. **h₂b-l-ós* (so Beekes 1995: 177, for a review of other opinions cf. NIL: 263). As regards the second lexeme, the **meh₂-lo* and Hittite *mahlaš*, it has been argued that it should be taken as loanword (so Kuryłowicz 1927: 102

after Goetze 1925¹; see also the discussion of this word and problems in semantics mentioned by Kloekhorst 2008: 539–540). The former root (**h₂ebōl*), or rather the word which gave the name for ‘apple’ in the respective Indo-European languages, has been discussed at length by many scholars (see Zavaroni 2008: 35–37 for the discussion of earlier views) whose views on the subject differ: some claim that it is a real PIE root (NIL: 364, Matasović 2004: 97, Beekes 1995: 177, Gamkrelidze-Ivanov 1995: 549) while others claim that it belongs to the lexicon of North-West Indo-European (Meillet 1922: 19, Hamp 1979, Markey 1988, Oettinger 2003: 189) and still others compare it to words in other language families like Zavaroni who connects it with the word for ‘genitals’ in the Hamito-Semitic languages and reconstructs as **HmB-*, partly building on the hypothesis of Vennemann (Zavaroni 2008). The latter proposal seems not very likely to me, since it also treats **meh₂-lo* and **h₂ebōl* as coming back together to the single root **HmB-*. Further probable Indo-European and even Altaic, specifically Turkic, cognates were ably discussed at length by Erdal (Erdal 1993), who pointed out the chronological difference between the attested Turkic and Indo-European words but also tried to connect both lexemes for ‘apple’ in Indo-European in one proto-form which seems to be a forced analysis. The analysis of the PIE lexeme for ‘apple’, along with genetic details, was also done by Friedrich in his monograph on PIE trees (Friedrich 1970: 57–64). He claims that it is not possible either to treat both lexemes (**meh₂-lo* and **h₂ebōl*) as going back to a single PIE root, nor to prove a borrowing from a non-Indo-European language (Friedrich 1970: 64). However, the general tendency nowadays seems to favour the reconstruction of **h₂ebōl* as an inherited PIE word.

2. Now, the main controversy connected with this topic is whether **h₂ebōl* is really the inherited name for ‘apple’ and whether we are entitled to reconstruct it for PIE even though it is attested in the North-West lexicon only. Already Meillet (1937: 383) observed the fact that etymologists in general and Indo-Europeanists in particular, tend to project everything into prehistory as inherited what they can reconstruct and everything which does not show obvious signs of being a borrowing². But the lexicon of every language, without exception, is bound to have

¹ “*maḥlaś* «pomme»: gr. *μᾶλον* est intéressant quoique le mot ne soit pas indoeuropéen (A. Götz: *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* 1925)” (Kuryłowicz 1927: 102).

² “Les étymologistes raisonnent souvent comme si tous les mots des langues attestées qui ne sont pas notoirement empruntés à des idioms connus devaient être d’origine indo-européenne, et ils utilisent pour fournir une étymologie indo-européenne de chaque mot d’une des langue de la famille toutes les ressources de leur ingéniosité: c’est oublier que, entre la période indo-européenne et les plus anciens textes de chaque langue, il s’est écoulé des centaines d’années, durant lesquelles il a pu être fait un nombre illimité d’emprunts à des langues aujourd’hui inconnues” (Meillet 1937: 383).

borrowings. And PIE, no matter what we conceive it to be (a true PIE language or a hypothetical construct), was no exception here. We simply have no rigid and ultimate way to judge whether a given lexeme is a borrowing or not. The usual method of identification (cf. Campbell 2004: 69–74) fail us if the borrowing is already commonly present in the language, has been already very well accommodated or is a *Wanderwort* (not to mention that we do not have the original form attested in the probable “donor language”). In that case, it might be possible that the borrowing occurred way back in prehistory (cf. a similar suggestion by Fortson 2010: 45), when the Indo-European speaking tribes invaded or simply colonized the regions of Europe, probably inhabited by the Pre-Indo-European substrate languages. In that case, the borrowing would have been very well accommodated in the language and not easily identifiable. However, there are some ways to trace it. Let me give another example: the PIE word for ‘white’ reconstructed variously as **(h₁)alb^hos* (Weiss 2008: 74) or **h₂olb^hos* (De Vaan 2008: 32 after Lubotsky p.c.). This word is attested in Hittite as *alpaš* (meaning a ‘cloud’, probably a ‘stormy cloud’ that is why some scholars would immediately decline it as being cognate with ‘white’ but others point to the fact, that clouds are usually white; I would opt for the latter hypothesis³), in Greek as *alp^hós* ‘white leprosy’, in Latin as *albus* ‘white’, in Umbrian as *alfir* (abl. pl.) and probably also in Slavic as e.g. Polish *labędź* ‘swan’ (cf. Boryś 2005: 292). From the point of view of modern Indo-European linguistics we have a problem in reconstructing the Anlaut of this word, because Greek and Latin clearly point to the **h₂e-* but the laryngeal is not preserved in Hittite as it should be according to regular sound laws (cf. Greek *ávτí* ‘before’ and Hittite *ḫantezzi* ‘first’ from PIE **h₂ent-*). Kuryłowicz back in the 1930s made an *ad hoc* assumption that there was a **h₄* which coloured the **h₄e* sequence into **h₄a*, just like **h₂e* gives **h₂a*, but disappeared in Hittite without a trace (Kuryłowicz 1935: 29–30). This has, of course, no coverage in the attested languages. Another solution was posited most recently by Weiss (Weiss 2008: 74), who claims that this lexeme began with **h₁*, which was subsequently lost in Hittite as expected, and it had a vowel **/a/*. But this requires us to posit another lexeme with prehistoric PIE **/a/*, the presence of which in the proto-language is marginal (cf. Meier-Brügger 2003: 82–83, Beekes 1995: 138–139), though not non-existent (cf. Weiss 2009: 41). Yet another solution was posited by de Vaan following Lubotsky (de Vaan 2008: 32) that the Hittite word was actually coming back to PIE **h₂olb^hos* sequence with the *o*-grade of the root and the laryngeal was then lost due to Saussure’s Effect (cf. Meier-Brügger 2003: 118–119). This is again, an *ad hoc* solution of an *o*-grade in one lexeme only (where other languages

³ Michael Weiss (p.c.) informs me that the actual meaning of the Greek and Latin words corresponding to the Hittite one is ‘dim’ and ‘greyish’ rather than ‘white’ which strengthens this argument.

show clearly the *e*-grade), just like Kuryłowicz's fourth laryngeal. It seems to me that those are the prevalent contemporary hypotheses concerning that lexeme. Yet, back in the 1930s, Meillet and Ernout observed that this lexeme may be of non-Indo-European origin (Ernout-Meillet 1951: 36), probably a borrowing from one of the pre-Indo-European substrate languages, of which we, unfortunately, know nothing at all. Of course, this solution cannot escape the criticism of being an *ignotum per ignotius* – after all, we have no direct traces of the pre-Indo-European substrate languages from the ancient times in continental Europe and one might say that invoking substrate influence is a sort of a “sweep-under-the-carpet-solution”. The same solution is put forward by Kortlandt (Kortlandt 2003: 3) and it seems very strange that it is not mentioned by either Kloekhorst (Kloekhorst 2008: 169) or de Vaan (de Vaan 2008: 32). Whereas in principle this could seem possible, it could also be that the word is a true Indo-European lexeme. As demonstrated by Schindler (Schindler 1978) it falls into the category of colour/appearance names with the **-b^ho-* suffix. This may mean that the word either belongs to the inherited lexicon of Proto-Indo-European (with yet another example of **/a/* phoneme) or it is an ancient and well-accommodated loanword. This is impossible to discern given the fact that there is no viable donor language.

3. The same might be true with ‘apple’. The more so that this lexeme was probably preserved in the Sabellic place name – Oscan *Abella* in Campania (cf. the Oscan word *abellanús*) which was described as *mālifera*, i.e. literally “carrying apples”, “rich in apples” by Vergil (*Aeneid*, VII, 740). As Meillet rightly suggests (Meillet 1937: 398) this might point to the fact that the Sabellic peoples borrowed this lexeme from the earlier substrate (or the borrowing occurred into North-West-Indo-European) while the Romans borrowed the term *μῆλον* from Greek (where it came from the Mediterranean substrate). It is noteworthy to observe that this word falls in the category of lexical differences between Latin and Sabellic to which the words for “fire” (Latin *ignis* : Umbrian *pir*), “water” (Latin *aqua* : Umbrian *utur*) and “people” (Latin *populus* : Oscan *touto*), among others, belong (cf. Wallace 2007: 54–55).

4. The problem with the geographical distribution of the lexeme for ‘apple’ **h₂ebōl* or **abōl* is furthermore complicated with the existence of Middle Iranian words for ‘apple’: e.g. in Pashto *maṇá* ‘apple’, which could be traced back to **amarna* < **abarna*, cf. Mallory-Adams 2006: 158. If the Iranian words are cognates with the North-West Indo-European names for ‘apple’ then it might point to a common Proto-Indo-European lexeme. However, the *a*-vocalism, the presence of marginal phoneme /b/ and a somewhat unclear formation of the word (it is considered to be an *l*-stem but there are hardly any words belonging to this class reconstructed for the proto-language) might point to the fact that it is an

ancient loanword or a Wanderwort (this hypothesis was already put forward by Joki 1964). It is, of course, equally possible that the other languages (like Hittite for example) lost this word and borrowed the other term leaving us with no traces of this older borrowing or inheritance. Additionally, Vaclav Blažek has recently argued that the word for 'apple' should be considered a borrowing but from Semitic rather than from an unknown pre-Indo-European substrate (cf. Blažek 2004: 23). His argument is based on the fact that the Indo-European and Semitic traditions share similar mythological motifs concerning 'apples' and that there is a Semitic word for denoting different fruits reconstructed as **ʔabul-* and **ʔubal-*. However, this root and reconstruction is not given by the authors of the etymological dictionary of Semitic languages (Orel-Stolbova 1995). They reconstruct the Semitic word for 'apple' as **tūpaḥ-* (cf. Orel-Stolbova 1995: 508). The only other Semitic word bearing resemblance to the Indo-European word for 'apple' is the word denoting 'genitals', reconstructed as **ʔabol-* (Orel-Stolbova 1995: 2). The diverging meaning of this lexeme is in my opinion an argument enough to disprove any connection with the Indo-European word (cf. also the discussion of Zavaroni's hypothesis above).

5. As I have shown, there is more to be said about the probable reconstruction of the root for 'apple' in PIE. The controversy goes back essentially to the basic problem of comparative linguistics, i.e. how to divide the lexicon of an attested language into the inherited and borrowed part.

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